

Coverage or Content: An Examination of Media's Dramatization of Serial Killers

By: Emily Irons

Introduction

After coming home from a long day of work, a woman, let us call her Jane Doe, decides to take a break on her couch before making dinner for her family. As she flips through the channels on her television, Jane comes across a murder documentary. Intrigued, Jane intently watches the documentary and forgets about her plan to make dinner. The murder documentary distracted Jane from her everyday life and duties which is exactly what the media does to the rest of society. Not only does the media, such as social media or news channels, distract people by reporting controversial news stories, but the media also distracts society from the reality of crimes. Because of media's dramatic depiction of serial killers and criminals' thirst for attention, research proves that the media's portrayal of serial killers treats these criminals like celebrities.

What comes to mind when you think of the word serial killer? Do you think of famous serial killers, such as Ted Bundy or Jeffrey Dahmer? Or do you think of the vicious acts these killers have committed? If you think of the serial killers themselves, possibly how you saw their face on a shirt, you are thinking of the celebrity side of a serial killer and not their murderous side. Serial killers can be compared to Hollywood superstars because capitalist culture creates merchandise and catchy nicknames for both groups, worshipping the actions that made them famous; this idea will further be discussed in this paper. By focusing on the relationship between media and serial killers, the media's dramatic portrayal of these murders proves to be one of the major reasons that most killers are sensationalized and commercialized in United States culture. To further understand the disposition of this research, defining two important key terms, "serial killers" and "media", is pertinent to the core of these findings.

Defining Key Terms: Serial Killers and Media

Before unmasking the true, horrific essence of a serial killer, one should generally define what a person must perform in order to be classified as a serial killer. According to Robert J. Morton and his extensive file on serial killers, in accordance with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and under the Protection of Children from Sexual Predator Act of 1998 (Title 18, United States Code, Chapter 51, and Section 1111), "The term 'serial killings' means a series of three or more killings, not less than one of which was committed within the United States, having common characteristics such as to suggest the reasonable possibility that the crimes were committed by the same actor or actors." As one can see, the definition of serial killings, which can relate to defining the term serial killers, is very specific and can only be used for certain crimes. The term serial killings was established in the late 1990's to differentiate types of murderers and to identify certain crimes in which the FBI could work with local law enforcements. After establishing this definition, though, many experts found loopholes in the meaning; for example, law enforcement officials were unsure if the term mass murderer, like school shooters, fell under the category of what specified a serial killer. Through much research



of crimes and laws, scholars and law officials concluded on the following criteria to defining a serial killer: “One or more offenders; two or more murdered victims; incidents should be occurring in separate events, at different times” (Morton). Morton also specifies that “the time period between murders separates serial murder from mass murder.” In this case, school shooters, bar gunman, and other mass murderers are not considered serial killers. These set standards not only help law enforcement classify criminals as serial killers, but the identification of the term also helps society start to understand the true nature of the beast.

Next, it is important to define the term “media” in relation to serial killers. The word media implies all the different physical or technological forms of communication people use in order to share information. “What Is Media? Definition and Meaning,” by *Market Business News*, an online source, describes media as “the communication channels through which we disseminate news, music, movies, education, promotional messages and other data.” Although there are many types of outlets that fall under the media category, the word itself includes all these forms in one general key word. For example, when I use the phrase “media’s portrayal of serial killers,” this entails and is referring to news channels, newspapers, social media platforms, and other mediums that publicly display information to society. In short, media is defined broadly, and serial killers is specific; these key terms will be useful for comprehending the research discovered on the relationship between media and serial killers.

A Psychoanalysis of Serial Killers and Their Behavior

A final area needs to be covered before diving into the main points of this argument: the psychology behind serial killers. While there is a large debate on whether evil derives from nature or nurture, it is pertinent for researchers, scholars, and even society to examine the many avenues of psychology pertaining to serial killers. In *Hardwired Behavior* by Laurence Tancredi, nature can be described as a person's genetics that make-up who they are, implying that the biology of a person can be preconceived as bad thus making the individual born to be a bad person, or in the framework of this argument, a criminal. On the other hand, nurture is a person's environment and atmosphere; for example, an individual can have a “perfect life,” such as having great parents and living financially comfortably, and still become a serial killer (Tancredi 61-2). The most common form of negative factors affecting the environment is childhood trauma. Trauma, such as child neglect or abuse, can greatly affect a person’s brain. It is important to note just how vital the brain is to the rest of body. Tancredi sufficiently explains how much of a role the brain plays in decision making: “Because the brain is basic to decision making, it must play a powerful role in our thinking regarding moral issues, and consequently in the way we treat each other in our society to maintain order and uphold fairness, individual rights, and equity” (1). When the brain undergoes physical and mental mistreatment, like trauma, the brain still plays an important role, as mentioned by Tancredi; however, the role of the brain may switch from the protagonist to the antagonist. Since the brain has a significant role in decision making, moral judgment, which is closely related to decision making, is another important topic to study when looking at serial killers.

Tancredi's work also explains the two types of judgement a person experiences when presented with a moral dilemma, which could lead to deciding to kill someone or not. The first type of judgment is personal judgment, or when a person's preconceived beliefs and senses come into play. When personal judgement is overwhelmed, actions without thought can be committed, such as a customer choking a salesperson over a dispute of a priced item. The second type of judgment is cognitive judgment that deals with impersonal and logic-based experiences. For example, if a person must choose between a train hitting five people or changing the tracks so the train only hits one person, the person choosing would most likely pick the second option because it does not affect them and it logically saves four people. Judgments become more subjective and harder to understand when more personal elements are involved (Tancredi). Now apply the information of the two types of judgment to serial killers. As calculated by the FBI's Crime Data Explorer, 6,096 homicides were reported in 2019, and out of the 6,096 victims 1,024 victims were complete strangers to the killer. As previously stated, moral dilemmas are easier to make when they are less personal, but when a traumatized brain is added into this equation, the easy decision is not always the right decision (Tancredi). When a killer with brain damage is experiencing a moral dilemma of having the urge to kill someone, the act of murder is easier to commit when the victim is a stranger because the killer has no personal ties. By analyzing the brain's crucial role to a person's conscience and how damage can affect a person's judgment skills, society can get a better understanding of why killers commit these awful crimes, especially when these killers have experienced some sort of trauma. While the study of a serial killer's brain may seem like enough examination on a killer's behavior, there is another modern factor that plays into the influence of serial killers and their behavior – the media.

Serial Killers in Popular Culture

Murder documentaries on *Netflix*, serial killer coloring books, and Freddy Kruger Halloween costumes are all forms of media and merchandise that pay tribute to serial killers as if they are Hollywood stars. In the beginning, I focused on defining key terms and acknowledging the psychology behind murderers, specifically how trauma can affect their behavior. Now, I extend this idea by answering why society gives so much attention to individuals once they have committed the gruesome act. In "Casting Cultural Monsters: Representations of Serial Killers in U.S. and U.K. News Media," author Julie B. Wiest rationalizes, "Serial murder is deeply embedded in Western cultures, and serial killers have become perverse icons as legendary as other monsters known throughout history in cultural myths" (327). News outlets have dramatized serial killers so much that the public views serial killers as celebrities instead of what they really are: murderous offenders. To extend this idea further, reporting on serial killers can even influence other people to kill so they can get the same attention serial killers receive from the media. In *Serial Killers*, Joel Norris argues a circumstance where a serial killer successfully influenced another killer; this second killer can be defined as a copycat killer: "The police feared that he would become a copycat killer who reacted to the news of the serial murderer by committing his own homicides" (13). A copycat killer is a prime example of how media reports on murderers can give the wrong idea to people who are looking for a way to grab society's

attention. On top of public awareness from reports and other forms of media, murderers are receiving merchandise in their admiration justifying the crimes they have committed.

Think of stores like Hot Topic or Spencer's; these stores typically sell shirts and merchandise displaying popular icons, such as serial murderers. Why do these stores, and many like them, sell souvenirs flaunting killers and validating the crimes these criminals committed? Since mass media also entails physical items, shirts and mugs are considered forms of media resulting in other tactics for media platforms to further glorify the horrendous acts committed by perpetrators. Robert Conrath, author of "The Guys Who Shoot to Thrill: Serial Killers and the American Popular Unconscious," slaps society in the face by blatantly listing all the items serial killers attain in their honor: "And finally, as with every hyped event or person, the serial killer has found himself at the vortex of a complex network of merchandizing: biographies...film rights and made-for-TV movies, documentaries, but also the obligatory appendages of the culture industry—tee shirts, board games, comic books, trading cards, toy dolls, and Halloween masks" (150). Similarly to Conrath, Brian Jarvis, author of "Monsters Inc.: Serial killers and Consumer Culture," also notes the memorabilia murderers inherit with their names on it, calling it "murderabilia":

Murderabilia ranges from serial killer art (paintings, drawings, sculpture, letters, poetry), to body parts (a lock of hair or nail clippings), from crime scene materials to kitsch merchandising that includes serial killer T-Shirts, calendars, trading cards, board games, Halloween masks and even action figures of 'superstars' like Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer and John Wayne Gacy. (327)

At one point, some serial killers, such as David Berkowitz nicknamed "Son of Sam," attained payment from taking part in interviews for documentary content. While reading a list of memorabilia and opportunities of attention for serial killers seems useful, analyzing a real-life case of a serial killer, who basked in the grandeur of social media, is even more effective in understanding the actuality of this argument.

"Son of Sam": A Case Study

According to Meredith Worthen, author of "David Berkowitz" on *Biography.com*, David Berkowitz, also known as the "Son of Sam," is a notorious serial killer known for his murders in the Bronx and his catchy nickname. Born on June 1, 1953, in Brooklyn, New York, Richard David Falco was the son of a poor Jewish woman. Only a few days old, Falco was adopted by Jewish hardware store owners, changing his last name from Falco to Berkowitz, in hopes of giving him a better life than if he would have stayed with his impoverished mother. Although this plan was not ideal, Berkowitz became a troubled kid as he suffered greatly from the death of his biological mother. To escape reality, Berkowitz enlisted into the United States Army at the age of 18. After finishing his service in 1974, Berkowitz returned to New York City and obtained a job as a U.S. Postal Service worker. From the outside, Berkowitz seemed like a quiet loner; however, New York City was not prepared for the terror Berkowitz would reign on the city (Worthen).

Over the course of his killings, Berkowitz managed to murder six people and attack many more from 1976 to 1977 creating his abominable legacy (Worthen). Berkowitz's first victims were Jody Valenti and Donna Lauria who were shot in a parked car on July 29, 1976. Berkowitz shot and injured another couple in a car a few months later. In November of that year, Berkowitz shot yet another set of two teenage girls. Lastly, an additional couple was shot and injured by Berkowitz within the same year of the previous shootings. Police did not know these shootings were connected until they realized that the same weapon, a .44 caliber gun, was being used in all the attacks. The use of the same weapon alarmed police, but for media this was the perfect opportunity to give the killer a catchy name as media named Berkowitz the ".44 caliber killer." More innocent people were injured or killed from Berkowitz's rampage, yet he was still roaming freely. Eventually, Berkowitz left his first letter addressed to the New York Police Department (NYPD) captain explaining his crimes and calling himself the "Son of Sam" (Worthen). As stated in *The Encyclopedia of Serial Killers* by Michael Newton, the letter penned, "But I am a monster, I am the Son of Sam" (16). These trails of letters would not only help police uncover Berkowitz's true identity, but these letters also made Berkowitz infamous for his terrible actions.

While nicknaming serial killers and criminals seems light-hearted, these nicknames actually "fueled the fire" by providing motivation to these perpetrators. Although Berkowitz's nickname, "Son of Sam," seems entertaining, Berkowitz and other serial killers will work extra hard killing innocent people to live up to their name. Worthen states, "Throughout his murderous streak, Berkowitz left numerous letters near his victims' bodies, taunting the police and eluding their capture. As a result, the media coverage of his crimes was widespread and Berkowitz relished the spotlight." Worthen clearly notes how the media's reports on his killings made Berkowitz feel like a celebrity rather than what he truly was: a killer. Further, after being caught by the police, Berkowitz told a story about a satanic possessed dog who told him to carry out the killings, creating even more attention for Berkowitz: "[The] Labrador retriever was allegedly possessed by ancient demons, beaming out commands for Berkowitz to kill and kill again" (Newton 17). After being incarcerated and attending therapy, Berkowitz took back his statement about the possessed dog saying it was all fake and for attention: "Since his arrest, Berkowitz has retracted his possessed dog 'Son of Sam' story — claiming 'It was all a hoax, a silly hoax' as seen in his March 20, 1979 letter to his psychiatrist, Dr. David Abrahamsen" (Worthen). The "Son of Sam" case is a prime example of how naming—or using a name given by the killers themselves—and releasing the impractical stories told by murderers extends the publicity these criminals already obtain from the acts of violence they have committed. Lastly, what is important to note about the "Son of Sam" case, specifically, is the compensation Berkowitz received when doing television interviews and media broadcastings.

When you think about Jane watching the murder documentary, does it cross your mind if criminals receive payment from partaking in television productions, similar to actors and actresses? While it is different state to state, recent laws have emerged in New York City, called the "Son of Sam laws," which prohibits all criminals from collecting pay through interviews and memorabilia: "Berkowitz has been paid substantial sums of money to share his story. However,

nearly all states — including New York — have since passed laws, sometimes known as ‘Son of Sam laws,’ that prevent convicted criminals from financially profiting from books, movies, or other enterprises related to their crimes” (Worthen). While Berkowitz initially received payout for entertainment purposes, like interviews, recent laws have prevented present and future criminals to, essentially, be paid for their terrible deeds. Although this idea of funding serial killers is now prohibited, these criminals are still put on societal pedestals with souvenirs mocking their murders, extensive murder mystery documentaries about their crimes, and interviews that give these killers multiple chances to excuse why they carried out heinous acts. After all, it is the dramatic way that media outlets report on murderers that makes it possible for these criminals to have their own coloring books.

After hearing this argument about media giving too much attention to serial killers, many people might disagree with my theory and feel that reports on these perpetrators are mainly for emergency purposes. I acknowledge and even agree that news channels hold the power to alert the nation about criminals in dire situations; however, it is the *way* media reports on these killers that treats them like superstars. In “Murder as One of the Liberal Arts,” John Hitchcock declares, “...most true-crime reports are the equivalent of tabloid news” (277). How has society reached the point where crime reports are equivalent to “tabloid news” as stated by Hitchcock? The answer is that it is the media’s need for entertaining content rather than factual coverage that has shaped society for the worse. Media has gone so far as to cast these criminals as celebrities that serial killers have developed fan bases, like Taylor Swift’s fan base that is called “Swifties.” As stated by Jack Levin in his book *Serial Killers and Sadistic Murderers - Up Close and Personal*, “Like other celebrities, serial killers have fans who flock to courtrooms during trials and prison visitation rooms after convictions, and they receive a substantial number of letters, visitors, and even marriage proposals (Levin, 2008)” (qtd. in Wiest 331). It is one thing for fans to attentively watch murder documentaries, like *Jane*, but it is extreme for these fans to propose their romantic love to these predators. I suspect that this infatuation with serial killers is a direct result from the romanticization of serial killers in the media. As previously discussed, media tends to nickname serial killers or use the nickname serial killers provide for themselves, such as David Berkowitz naming himself “Son of Sam” in a letter he wrote to the NYPD. Besides creating a catchy phrase for the title of a criminal report, there is no direct purpose for these nicknames when covering serial killers. Putting all this together, media reports on criminals imitate “tabloid news”; extenuate the killer, which then makes fans fall in love with them; and establish fun labels for these killers, ultimately making a serious subject amusing (Hitchcock 277). It is these dramatic mechanisms that turn crime reports into sick forms of entertainment where the killer is the star of the show. While the killer may seem like an important character, many people forget about the victims and their role in the crime.

The Impact of Media’s Dramatization of Serial Killers on Victims

Not only does dramatizing serial killer stories affect the perpetrator, but this approach also affects the victims of the crime. As difficult as this may seem, imagine someone in your family is brutally murdered by a serial killer. Still coping from this pain, you see shirts, mugs,

memes, and various types of retail trending with the face of the killer who murdered your family member. How does this make you feel? Are you angry that the killer is receiving more attention than your own, innocent family member? This scenario has happened countless times to the family and friends of innocent victims, and this scenario will continue to happen if media outlets do not stop how they are reporting on criminals. Wiest emphasizes that “[i]n U.S. articles, victims are mostly invisible: They are included as numbers in body counts, rarely identified by name, with few details about their lives” (334). Media may categorize these victims as numbers in statistics; however, at the end of the day, these victims were children, parents, friends, partners, teammates, and, most importantly, innocent *humans*. Whether people agree or disagree with the argument that media and news sites turn crime reports into entertaining anecdotes, all people should at least recognize the negative affects treating criminals like celebrities has had on victims and their families. Understandably, it can be hard for members of society to exit the never-ending circle of pop-culture; however, society should always be mindful of the people and items they are supporting.

Jane is still sitting on her couch watching the same murder documentary. About an hour has passed, and Jane realizes that she forgot to make dinner for her family. She notes how mesmerized her mind was, watching the dramatic and entertaining murder show, that she forgot about her own duties she has in real life. As members of society, we must not let the media overrule our culture, popular icons, and daily life like Jane. Even if society gives in to marketing tactics and buys serial killer Halloween costumes, these consumers should be aware of what they are buying and how their purchases can affect societal trends. People need to realize that the media’s dramatic effect on crime stories ultimately treats evil serial killers like celebrities. Media outlets have the power to influence pop-culture; however, it is up to society to distinguish whether media reports on serial killers are for factual coverage or entertaining content.

Emily Irons '24 is an Early Childhood and Special Education major from Franklin, PA.

Works Cited

- Conrath, Robert. “The Guys Who Shoot to Thrill: Serial Killers and the American Popular Unconscious.” *Revue Française D'études Américaines*, no. 60, 1994, pp. 143–152. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20872423. Accessed 24 Mar. 2021.
- “Expanded Homicide Offense Characteristics in the United States: Victim’s Relationship to the Offender, 2019.” *Federal Bureau of Investigation Crime Data Explorer*, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2020, <https://crime-data-explorer.app.cloud.gov/explorer/national/united-states/shr>.
- Hitchcock, James. “Murder as One of the Liberal Arts.” *American Scholar*, vol. 63, no. 2, Spring 1994, p. 277. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9403287783&site=ehost-live.

- Jarvis, Brian. "Monsters Inc.: Serial killers and Consumer Culture." *Crime, Media, Culture*, 2007, pp. 326-44. doi:10.1177/1741659007082469
- Newton, Michael. "Berkowitz, David Richard." *The Encyclopedia of Serial Killers*. Checkmark Books, 200.
- Norris, Joel. *Serial Killers*. Anchor Book, Doubleday, 1989.
- Morton, Robert J. *Serial Murder: Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives for Investigators. Behavioral Analysis Unit-2, National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, Critical Incident Response Group, Federal Bureau of Investigation*. <https://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/serial-murder> Accessed 5 Apr. 2021.
- Tancredi, Laurence. *Hardwired Behavior*. Cambridge UP, 2005. Accessed 29 Mar. 2021.
- "What Is Media? Definition and Meaning." *Market Business News*, 13 Feb. 2019, <https://marketbusinessnews.com/financial-glossary/media-definition-meaning/> Accessed 14 Apr. 2021.
- Wiest, Julie B. "Casting Cultural Monsters: Representations of Serial Killers in U.S. and U.K. News Media." *Howard Journal of Communications*, vol. 27, no. 4, Oct. 2016, pp. 327–346. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/10646175.2016.1202876. Accessed 18 Mar. 2021.
- Worthen, Meredith. "David Berkowitz." Biography.com, A&E Networks Television, 8 Sept. 2020, www.biography.com/crime-figure/david-berkowitz. Accessed 5 Apr. 2021.